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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 005705

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TAGS: OPRC PREL PGOV CH TH ASEAN

SUBJECT: EYE ON AMERICA? - CHINESE MEDIA IN THAILAND

BANGKOK 00005705 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton, Reasons 1.4 (B) (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Representing television, radio and print media, six Mainland Chinese press outlets are present in Thailand. Each organization's mandate varies, but all have small staffs and budgets. Most reporters do not speak Thai and English appears to be their working language. While the Guangming Daily prefers to report on Thai cultural and special interest pieces, the Xinhua News Agency is attempting to secure a foothold in providing hard news in Thailand through its multimedia database. CCTV (China Central Television) covers only official Chinese visits and "sudden developments" in the region. Several of the newspapers have inserts in local Thai newspapers while the CCTV provides video feeds to a Thai news channel. These media outlets are also keenly focused on strategic US engagements with ASEAN and the SEA region. End summary.

THE PLAYERS

¶2. (SBU) There are six Mainland Chinese media outlets in Thailand -- Xinhua News Agency, China News Agency (Zhongxin She), People's Daily News Agency, Guangming Daily Media Group, China Central Television (CCTV), and China Radio International (CRI). Of these, Xinhua News have been in Thailand the longest, established here in 1975. While larger operations such as Xinhua News have country bureaus in every ASEAN-member country except Laos, Bangkok is the regional hub for smaller, one-person operations such as Guangming Daily. (Note: For comparison -- AP, AFP, Reuters and Kyoto all have large regional offices in Bangkok. CNN, BBC, Star, NHK and Australian Broadcasting Corporation have television facilities. End note.)

¶3. (C) Chinese staff all positions in these outlets, sent from their headquarters in Beijing. Terry Li (protect), Thailand Bureau Chief for Guangming Daily, told Poloff that there is no Thai staff in his office because "there is no budget." Xinhua reporter, Ling Shuo explained that the Chinese media have adopted the "one-man reporter/cameraman" concept for its overseas operations to save cost. CCTV reporter, Wang Yuguo, said that he was sent overseas because he could "film, interview and produce segments on his own."

¶4. (C) While a few of the reporters speak Thai, most of the journalists use English as their working language. As a Thai speaker, Zhang Qulai (Thailand Bureau Chief for Xinhua News) explained that "the number of Thai speakers in China are so

few that you can count them with your fingers" because most universities do not offer Thai language courses.

THE GAME

NUMBERS VARY

¶ 15. (C) Mandates for the media outlets vary vastly, as do their monthly output quotas. While small operations like the Guangming Daily are asked to produce five monthly articles, Xinhua sources claim that their office produces upwards of 300 news items a month. Wang of CCTV explained that, unlike Xinhua, CCTV's international department is still relatively young. His two-men office in Thailand is asked only to travel with Chinese delegations during official visits and to cover "sudden developments" in the region such as natural disasters. The number of news pieces produced thus varies from month-to-month.

TOPICS VARY

¶ 16. (C) Zhang told Poloff that Xinhua currently has more than 100 branch offices in over ninety countries with a mandate to report on news-worthy items across the spectrum. (Note: For comparison -- Reuters has 196 bureaus in 130 countries and AP has 240 bureaus in 130 countries. End note.) Interestingly, a frustrated Li (Guangming Daily) told Poloff that because newspapers such as Guangming, Xinhua and People's Daily are state-owned (under the Chinese Propaganda Department), they are asked to "refrain from writing political and economic pieces," since it may be "misconstrued as official PRC views" on the subject. Instead, Li's editor asks him to produce stories on Thai culture and "feel-good" special interest pieces, which, he commented, are hard to find.

BANGKOK 00005705 002.2 OF 003

COMMENT

¶ 17. (C) Zhang's claim that his office reports on all aspects of news - politics included - in Thailand starkly contrasts with Li's assertions. Ling's (Xinhua reporter) number of over 300 news items a month reported also appears exaggerated given the bureau's three-person operation. One possible explanation may be that the office includes individual photographs and short items as new stories to bolster their numbers for their bosses in Beijing. End comment.

MULTI-MEDIA: WAVE OF THE FUTURE

¶ 18. (C) Despite the large number of required news items, the reporters at Xinhua seemed more interested in selling the Xinhua Multimedia Database (<http://info.xinhua.org/eng>) to the Thai public (Comment: and to Poloff) than to talk about their reporting responsibilities. Zhang proudly informed Poloff that his database now boasts "over a hundred household subscribers." Yet with the goal of catching up to major wire services such as the Associated Press (AP) or Reuters, Zhang admitted that "there is still a long way to go."

OTHER COLLABORATIONS

¶ 19. (C) Xinhua has been relatively successful in promoting its multimedia outlet in Thailand. Not only do the six local Thai-Chinese newspapers (including the Taiwanese-owned Universal Daily News) all take feeds from Xinhua, Ling claimed that it also powers most of the cell phone news-update engines in Thailand. (Note: Xinhua's Database also takes feeds from AP and Reuters. End note.) Separately, several local newspapers carry weekly inserts

from People's Daily and China Daily.

¶10. (C) Wang of CCTV told Poloff that Channel 9 in Thailand (Note: State-owned, nightly news broadcast viewership around 2 million. End note.) is also working with a branch company of CCTV to work on collaborative "special focus" programming.

Their last special was on the Thai King's Jubilee Celebrations. In addition, Wang mentioned that there have been plans to create a Chinese-Thai Channel in the works since last year between CCTV and a local Thai channel, although he did not elaborate on the details. Wang explained that the Thai want to collaborate with CCTV because "they want CCTV's satellite access both to the world and within the PRC." "Imagine the increase in viewership," Wang added.

EYES ON AMERICA

¶11. (S/NF) Other than reporting on Thai news and establishing a "soft-power" presence in Thailand, the Chinese media here are also keenly interested in US involvement with the ASEAN countries. Li of Guangming Daily asked Poloff not to mention their meeting to other Chinese nationals before leaning over and bluntly informing Poloff that, strategically, China's presence in Thailand is to "keep a close eye on the US." Li asserted that China has been concerned with the US "change of attitude toward ASEAN," including the recent signing of the ASEAN-US Enhanced Partnership agreement. Li stated that China believes this is a strategic move to "counterbalance the PRC" in the region.

¶12. (S/NF) Li suggested that China has "double insurance" for maintaining influence in Thailand -- China's increasing involvement in the Thai economy and the large number of ethnic Chinese-Thai who hold wealth and political power in the country -- and therefore is not overly concerned with losing influence in Thailand. In fact, Li added that Chinese strategic policies "tend to be passive elsewhere unless it concerns America, Taiwan, or the oil-producing countries." Li also suggested that India is becoming a new concern for China for various reasons including recent Indian offers to help safeguard the Malacca Strait.

¶13. (S/NF) COMMENT: Li's assertions, though extreme at face value, appear to be in line with post's own observations of both Chinese diplomats and members of the PRC media in Thailand. Although engaging and forthcoming, Chinese

BANGKOK 00005705 003.2 OF 003

diplomats are rarely interested in the minutiae of Thai politics and are much more interested in US involvement with ASEAN, in particular the ASEAN-US Enhanced Partnership and the ASEAN-US Dialogue that took place earlier in May. The Chinese media's curiosity is even more obvious. PRC reporters swarm to US military functions -- such as the opening ceremonies of the Cobra Gold exercise or ship visits like the recent port call of the USS Abraham Lincoln. For example, six reporters from Xinhua showed up for the opening of the Cobra Gold exercise last year despite Xinhua only having three reporters on staff in Bangkok. While these reporters were not "misbehaving" in any way, their attention seemed to be more focused on taking photographs of the machinery and headshots of US officers present than with filing any news stories. End comment.

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